Lazarus and Dives : Christianity

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de Gruyter
2017

Lehtipuu , O-I E 2017 , Lazarus and Dives : Christianity . in C Helmer , T Römer , S L McKenzie , J Schröter , B Dov Walfish & E Ziolkowski (eds) , Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception . vol. 15 , de Gruyter , Berlin , pp. 1090-1092 . https://doi.org/10.1515/ebr.lazarusanddives

http://hdl.handle.net/10138/310924
https://doi.org/10.1515/ebr.lazarusanddives

acceptedVersion

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The commonly used title "Dives and Lazarus" conceals the fact that in the biblical parable, the rich man is not named (dives is Latin for rich). Many ancient commentators considered this namelessness significant. Origen reminded his audience of "Solomon's words" according to which "a good name is better than much wealth" (cf. Prov 22:1) and pointed out that the dives of the story represents the opposite: a rich man without a name. An antitype of him is Job, a rich but blameless man with a name (Origen, Fr. Luc. 222). Similarly, the name of Lazarus reveals his piety, for the name has the meaning "the one who has been helped." No one helped Lazarus in his life but he had God as his helper (Jerome, Tract. var. 86; Augustine, Serm. 33A.4).

Another feature that attracted many comments is Jesus's exhortation to listen to "Moses and the prophets." This was taken as a sign of continuity between Hebrew scriptures and Christianity which was particularly useful to the anti-Marcionate writers (Irenaeus, Haer. 4.2.2–3; Tertullian, Marc. 4.34; Jerome, Tract. var. 86; cf. Augustine, Serm. 79.9). On the other hand, the story was read allegorically and used in anti-Jewish polemics. According to this reading, the rich man represents Jews and their "pride," Lazarus gentiles (Ambrose, Exp. Luc. 13–20; Augustine, Quaest. ev. 38.1, 4–5). Augustine also offered an alternative allegorical reading according to which Lazarus signifies Christ "who lowered himself by the humility of the incarnation" (Quaest. ev. 38.5).

The questions which have received most attention in the interpretative history of the parable, however, pertain to visions of the hereafter and of social justice (Bovon: 126–130). The depiction of the torments of the rich man in Hades and the comfort of Lazarus in Abraham's bosom gave rise to speculations whether the scene takes place immediately after death or after the last judgment. Are the tongue of the rich man and the finger of Lazarus signs of an embodied existence? Is Abraham's bosom located in heaven or in the netherworld? Several writers took the afterlife scene quite literally and concluded that it illustrates temporary conditions which anticipate the final destiny after last judgment (Irenaeus, Haer. 2.24.1; Tertullian, Marc. 4.34.11–14). Abraham's bosom cannot be Paradise since no one was allowed to enter Paradise before Christ opened the way by his resurrection (Jerome, Tract. var. 86).

Other commentators sought more figurative interpretations. If Lazarus was literally resting in Abraham's bosom, wrote Origen, someone else must have been there before him and he would have to give up his place to the next righteous soul. Instead, the one who rests in Abraham's bosom, just like the beloved disciple who rested in Jesus's bosom (John 13:23), is the one who rests upon the Word of God (Origen, Fr. Luc. 223). According to Gregory of Nyssa, the narrative is not about physical post-mortem existence but a parable about the choices of life between good and evil (Gregory of Nyssa, An. et res. 80B–88C). At the same time, Gregory reads the narrative as an example of the soul's purification; if not freed from the dominion of flesh through virtue in this world, the soul will experience torments in the next. Such interpretations of the story were crucial in the development of the doctrine of purgatory which became the dominant Christian view on life after death (Le Goff).

In the Reformation period, the Catholic doctrine of life after death was called into question. Luther's denial of the existence of purgatory evolved gradually and he ended up promoting the idea that souls sleep between death and the last judgment (Juhász: 164–179). Accordingly, he read the parable of Dives and Lazarus as an allegory: Abraham's bosom signifies the word of God while the hell where the rich man finds himself is the unbelieving conscience, separated from the word of God. The true hell will only begin on the day of judgement (WA 10/3.191–192; WA 12.595–596). A more literal understanding remained popular among some Reformers. While Calvin interpreted Abraham's bosom as a figure of speech denoting the communion of believers who all are children of Abraham, he held to the idea of immediate torment or bliss upon death (Comm. harm. ev. 13.123). Abraham's bosom is used as an image of salvation, comfort, and

safety, e.g., in the traditional African American spiritual Rock-a my soul in the bosom of Abraham and in Paul Green's play In Abraham's Bosom (1926).

The parable has been understood as a serious warning against riches and as an exhortation to help the poor (Irenaeus, Haer. 4.2.4; John Chrysostom, Quatr. Laz. 1.9–10; 3.1; Cyril of Alexandria, Serm. 111–112). This was the prevalent ethos in medieval mendicant sermons (Hanska) as well as in 16th century German drama (Wailes) that took the side of the poor and cautioned the rich against greed, avarice, and pride. At the same time, poverty was seen as God-given and the poor were urged to patiently wait for their reward in the world to come. The sores of the poor man were often taken as a sign of leprosy and, hence, Lazarus gave his name to a leper-house or a quarantine station in several languages: lazaretto (English), lazzaretto (Italian), lázareto (Spanish), lazareto (Portuguese), lazaret (French), Lazarett (German), lasarett (Swedish), lasaretti (Finnish). Not infrequently the poor man was confused with his Johannine namesake (John 11) and many of these hospitals were dedicated to Lazarus of Bethany who became the patron saint of lepers (Bériou: 35–36).

Albert Schweitzer referred to the story of Dives and Lazarus as an inspiration and a demand to abandon his successful academic career, study medicine, and establish a missionary hospital in Lambaréné, French Equatorial Africa, in present-day Gabon (Schweitzer: 9–10) and the parable became one of the key biblical passages in the so-called Social Gospel Movement of the 19th and 20th centuries. While Schweitzer's outlook was unavoidably colonial – Lazarus symbolized for him the "colored folk" (das Volk der Farbigen) "out in the colonies" – in more recent times the parable has played a significant role in global theology both among theologically educated and uneducated (Okafor; Autero).

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